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Libraries in Mexico: Context and Collaboration. An Interview with Dr. Jesús Lau, President, Mexican Library Association

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Introduction

Since 1992, Dr. Jesús Lau has been Director of the USBI VER Library at The Universidad Veracruzana Veracruz-Boca del Rio campus. The library offers information services to 11 faculties and a student population of 15,000. Dr. Lau's first degree is in Law, from the Universidad Autonoma de Sinaloa, located in Northwestern Mexico. Immediately after obtaining this first degree, he earned a Masters Degree in Library Science at the University of Denver, where he met Janet Lee while both were graduate students. Seven years later, Dr. Lau received a Ph.D. from Sheffield University in England. On the professional side, he is the President of the Mexican Library Association, 2009 to 2011. Dr. Lau also is a member of the Governing Board and member of the Executive Committee of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) and serves on several editorial/advisory boards of various publications, among them *Collaborative Librarianship*. As part of our interview series with members of our Advisory Board, *Collaborative Librarianship* caught up with Dr. Lau to find out about Mexican libraries and the opportunities and challenges in collaboration.

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CL: To understand better your immediate professional context, tell us about the development of libraries in Mexico? What are the strengths? What are the challenges? What does the future hold for all types of libraries in Mexico?

Lau: Well, this is a complex set of questions. I recently have seen published my chapter on Mexican libraries in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (ELIS) where I

give a general description of the state of Mexican libraries. Libraries in Mexico, in a few words, have an uneven development. Academic libraries are the most developed. They hire the greatest number of library professionals, have the largest budgets and they acquire the latest technology. Obviously not all libraries have the same development but the medium and large academic libraries tend to have good facilities and services. The second group of libraries that runs well in Mexico is public libraries; in fact, it is the largest library system in Latin America. This is a great achievement considering Brazil is twice the size in terms of geography and population. Again, the size and quality of services vary more or less according to the size of the town. The third type of libraries that also has achieved significant development is special libraries. They certainly are well organized, well funded, and provide some of the best information services.

School libraries are the least developed; they hardly exist, and those that do have limited resources. There are approximately 5,000 school libraries in the more than 120,000 schools. On a positive note, however, the Federal Government has had a reading program that has been quite successful in providing small library collections to all schools in the country whether they are public or private. According to Federal Government statistics, the government has distributed more than 200 million books to schools in the last 10 years. So, although most school libraries don't formally exist, there are library collections of some description in every school in Mexico.

Now in considering the strengths of libraries in Mexico, I would say that one strength is service orientation. Most libraries, includ-

ing academic and special libraries, are open to anyone who lives in the community. The second strength is that library demand is growing, in large part due to the expansion of education over the past few decades and due to the growth of internet access in urban settings. While the population growth rate is expected to slow down because of changing demographics, internet access and use are expected to increase.

The question about the future of libraries in Mexico is difficult to answer, but clearly, Mexican libraries will be affected by new technological developments, especially the expansion of internet services. People increasingly are relying on the internet for their day-to-day information needs. The increasing availability of Mexican information sources on the internet also fuels this demand. Libraries and librarians will have to adapt to the increased demand for web-based information. The greatest opportunity for all types of libraries is to adopt a new teaching role that society demands of them. Our users need to develop information capabilities that take advantage of the wider availability of free and open internet access, including the ability to locate, retrieve, evaluate and use information for a broad range of purposes.

CL: As President of the Mexican Library Association, tell us about recent initiatives of the Association and the importance of a professional organization for libraries and librarianship in Mexico.

Lau: The Mexican Library Association is one of the oldest associations in Latin America. It was originally founded in the early 1920s, but established its "legal existence" in 1956. During my term, 2009-2011, I am working vigorously with the Executive Committee and Chapters, and Committees to move the Association to a higher level of development to provide the services that our members demand. The first step I took as President-Elect was to initiate consultations leading to the drafting of a long-term plan. After a year and half, we completed the "AMBAC Strategic Plan 2015, Leader-

ship in Action." It is the first strategic plan of the Association.

The general objective is to make the Association more dynamic and relevant to its members. We are currently working on the main objectives, goals and actions, among them: (1), the creation of an Institutional Repository that includes the digitization of the proceedings of the last 40 Association annual conferences that began in the 1950s, as well as all the publications of the Association such as the bulletin "Noticiero de AMBAC." Members will soon be able to retrieve individually each publication and each paper. The collection of papers has been catalogued using *Dublin Core Metadata Standards*. A side project is (2), the indexing of the Association's bulletin "Noticiero AMBAC" that dates back to 1967 and records the history of the Association and of Mexican libraries in general. It is believed that this is the oldest library association bulletin in Latin America. Another key action is (3), the development of a new website that will have more content and be easier to navigate. We hope to have the first release during the summer of 2010. As action item (4), the Association hired a graphic designer to work on the corporate image of the organization so that all its activities and communications are similarly branded, including official colors, typography, layout and other design elements. And (5), we work on strengthening communication channels with the members, including two newly created listservs—one that is open to anyone and one just for members. We also created Facebook and Twitter accounts to deliver AMBAC news. Our younger members, we assume, are Facebook and Twitter fans so we are hoping to meet the communication expectations of a new generation of Association members.

Other initiatives include a donation campaign for modernizing of the Library Association facilities—our offices in Mexico City really need to be upgraded to achieve the Association's strategic plan. The campaign will be rolled out during the Association's Annual Conference this May. We hope to raise at least 50% of the funding required for

the project. A campaign is also underway to increase member participation in library conferences and meetings. We have plans in place for a very exciting Annual Conference that will take place in the Colonial Zacatecas, a high-altitude, former mining city located in the north central part of Mexico—offering dry, temperate weather for that time of year. Promising to be one of the best conferences in recent years, it will convene in the new Convention Center at the heart of the city. We have an excellent program with three keynote speakers: the President of ALA, Dr. Camila Alire (also on the Advisory Board of *Collaborative Librarianship*), and two well-known Mexican library colleagues, the Director of the Library Research Center of UNAM, and a mining expert from Zacatecas.

CL: You have had many opportunities to travel throughout Latin America. What particular successes and challenges do you see affecting library collaboration within and between these countries?

Lau: I think there are three main challenges for library collaboration in Latin America: social, political and economic. Among these challenges, the greatest is social. Social development determines a library association's capabilities in any particular country. Nations with less development also have less association growth—less interest in association affiliation and less association work with fewer numbers of library professionals. Latin America needs to have greater development in collaboration leading to stronger library associations. A socially well-developed society has citizens with more social skills for collaboration and for association. Political and economic challenges also become barriers to collaboration. As probably the second greatest challenge, economic factors play an important role in collaboration since funding is crucial to cooperative programs. Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and Colombia have more active library exchanges because they have greater economic resources. Political boundaries also frequently limit the movement of people and the exchange of library resources.

In summary, Latin America needs a more association-friendly attitude, and library associations need to be more meaningful to their members. However, despite these challenges, there is collaboration in Latin America, including organizations for joint training programs, professional librarian exchanges, and shared publications. But with a region as big as Latin America there is still a long road to go.

CL: International border communities are uniquely positioned, perhaps, to engage in library collaboration across national boundaries. What have been such opportunities and challenges between Mexico and the USA, for example?

Lau: This is a difficult question to answer, but taking into account my experience of working in Juarez University located just across the border from El Paso, Texas, I can say that there has been excellent collaboration. The best example is the Transborder Library Forum (FORO) that, if I recall correctly, will be 20 years old next year when the Forum meets in Austin, Texas. This is a unique conference that takes place between two countries with very different levels of library development: the USA with impressive library development and Mexico, a smaller and less developed country, with mid-level library development. FORO was first organized after the signing of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, between both countries, as well as Canada. FORO's objective is to try to use NAFTA's framework for better and more productive library collaboration, and has been the vehicle for some important bi-national projects, one being an interlibrary exchange between Southwestern libraries in the USA and various Mexican libraries. Supported by the US Embassy through the Benjamin Franklin Library, its diplomatic delivery system is used for exchanging library material. Another example of collaboration is Juarez University's reciprocal borrowing agreement with El Paso Community College and Mexico State University in Las Cruces, an arrangement in place now for many

years. There are other similar agreements between the Californias.

Some challenges that the FORO and any international collaboration faces are cultural in nature. American librarians tend to be more action oriented; they normally like things done quickly and efficiently. However, the Mexican culture is more leisurely and it relies more on face-to-face communication rather than on sending email messages or using other written communication. Collaboration tends to halt if cultures are not understood by the participating parties. As a personal example, I helped host a FO-RO conference and booked a hotel that offered some, but limited, vendor exhibit space. Well, American companies quickly booked almost all of the tables a month before the event, then suddenly we realized there would not be space for Mexican vendors. We had to book another hotel that fortunately had the vendor space we needed, but this experience demonstrated the cultural difference in time management.

Other cross-border challenges in library collaboration are economic in nature. American libraries have more resources while Mexican libraries generally are smaller and normally with fewer or no professional staff that can take part in collaboration projects. The political environment can also be another challenge, especially when a library manager wants to send someone to the USA. Getting a visa can be tricky if the librarian comes from a region where salaries are low; he or she may not be able to declare and prove enough income or savings to get the visa.

However, there are still many opportunities to cooperate with American colleagues. I, myself, have greatly benefitted through opportunities for collaboration with the American library community in conferences, staff exchanges, training programs and writing for American publications. In summary, I think librarians from both sides of the border have opportunities for collaboration as long as they overcome the cultural or social barriers.

CL: As a leader on the international stage, what do you see as some emerging opportunities for library collaboration?

Lau: Communication technology enables us to do many things that we could not do before. We can now communicate easily with colleagues from most corners of the world. Internet is a wonderful amalgamation of a great variety of telecommunication technologies and allows persons to form and be part of networks of all types, as long as we have a disposition for collaboration and are able to overcome the aforementioned cultural factors and other issues related to language. It doesn't matter if one is a librarian from a developing country or a rich country, one can always collaborate in some way. The main factor at the international level is willingness to spend time to make the library world a better place. The benefit of international collaboration is learning about other cultures and specifically learning how libraries operate. Important for me was understanding how librarians themselves live.

Coming to terms with the values of the colleagues, learning the history and geography of foreign groups and societies makes international collaboration a very enriching activity. As an example, under the direction of the President of IFLA, I joined a three-party editorial committee to compile a book on "Access to Knowledge" (A2K). One of my editorial colleagues is from Italy and the other from South Africa. A call for chapter contributions was made via the internet and we received chapter proposals from every continent. This amazing response demonstrated the value of international collaboration and the way understanding and awareness can be broadened in the international arena.

CL: As a leader in IFLA, what role do you see it playing in the field of library collaboration?

Lau: IFLA is a premier association in collaboration. I would say that is the largest international library association that fully engages in collaboration and cooperation

among libraries and librarians. For example, IFLA offers all of its conference papers and documents free of charge through its website, www.ifla.org, not only to members but to the rest of the library world. This large collection of conference papers is a unique source of library information from most countries, its greatest asset being the contributions from developing countries that users will not find anywhere else. IFLA, however, faces a challenge in translating documents into its seven official languages. While publications are mainly in English, the international *lingua franca*, great effort is made to translate papers into the other languages. The job is accomplished mainly with the help of IFLA member volunteers representing their respective library associations.

Another great contribution of IFLA is its standards, guidelines and manifestos for all types of libraries and library-related activities. These documents are tools that help develop potential areas of library cooperation. Its international conference, the World Library and Information Congress, is also a major venue for the exchange of library experiences and knowledge where participants come from approximately 100 countries. It is a wonderful place to meet library colleagues from around the planet and to engage in information sharing and library development on a wide scale. Funding is one challenge facing IFLA, but like many organizations it is meeting this challenge through the work of its membership. Library associations, individual members and corporate partners all contribute to its financial viability. Participants perform professional association duties for free and for the sake of the good of the global library community.

CL: Library collaboration on the international stage perhaps is more complex and challenging than on the national or local levels. If this is the case, what might be some of these challenges and how could they be overcome?

Lau: It is true that international collaboration is complex, but I feel, it is easier than doing this work on a national level. One can always find an international partner who is willing to participate in a joint international task, especially in countries in North America, Europe and some of the larger Asian countries with well-developed library organizations. This may not be the case in developing countries where on the national level one faces challenges related to language, to social and political environments. Again, on the national or regional level there is often little or less developed “cultures of cooperation.” At the local level, collaboration can be impeded because of the low numbers of libraries with professional librarians.

For example, the library where I work is the largest in the region and belongs to the largest university in the State, but other than this university campus library, there are few libraries in the region that have the capability or impetus to fully engage in joint efforts. Often these smaller libraries are run by non-professionals who seem to stay in their management roles for short periods. I led a regional annual colloquium on library management (ALCI) that gathered together library colleagues to discuss common management concerns; we have accomplished some objectives but due to some of the factors noted above, we have been unable to develop big collaboration projects, like joint borrowing agreements.

To sum up, the complexity of collaboration covers local, national and then international levels, the local one being the most difficult. How can we overcome these challenges? At least in my local community, we need to have library professionals in charge of libraries because they normally have a better idea of what collaboration can bring to their libraries. If there is little possibility of getting library professionals, we need to provide more library training—workshops on collaborations and cooperation—to the non-professional library leaders, so long as they remain in their positions for a reasonable length of time.

CL: If a librarian, new or seasoned, wants to become involved in library collaboration across national boundaries, how might one proceed? Would it entail getting involved in international library organizations? Do development organizations offer much by way of library programs? Are there other avenues of involvement?

Lau: My first recommendation for any young or seasoned librarian is to become a member of library associations – at least one local, one national and one international. Obviously, when someone becomes a member of an international association, the opportunities are greater for wide-scale collaboration because you are meeting foreign library professionals. Associations, in general, are the best place to develop skills in international collaboration and in library leadership that sees beyond one's own borders. If one cannot afford to pay international association membership fees, there are many national library associations with international committees, like those of the American Library Association and the Special Libraries Association. Joining an association and becoming part of an international committee is great training and is the best place to meet people who are interested in international collaboration.

Development organizations are also excellent resources, although perhaps they are more difficult to approach, but using your information skills you can dig up information to identify what development organizations offer (or need) in regard to international library collaboration. Another strategy is to attend international conferences, not necessarily library-related, when they are offered in your community or region. For example, I coordinate an online library management training program for Latin American university library staff. The program is organized by the Inter-American Organization of Higher Education based in Canada with initial funding from the Canadian Development Agency. I was able to attend an Inter-American university meeting in my own town, Veracruz where I met the President of this Association and talked

to her about library projects. To my surprise, a month later I received an invitation to lead this training program, and I immediately accepted the opportunity. Being in charge of creating the training program from scratch was an enriching experience, and I have been able to reach nearly 1,000 people from most Latin American countries in the 60-hour post-graduate level course. This opportunity also has allowed me to increase online course development skills and to work with library colleagues from North America and Latin America in the management and development of the program.

An important organization for library collaboration is UNESCO. I have worked on different projects with this United Nations organization, and if anyone visits and follows their website announcements, I am positive that one can find a project that is relevant and of interest. If you follow through, you can share your expertise and your knowledge with the rest of the international community. Another source of support for library collaboration is the foreign ministry department of most governments. One of its objectives, commonly, is to encourage cooperative agreements with other nations, and often literacy programs and libraries factor into such agreements.

In conclusion, there are opportunities for collaboration if one looks for them. If you get engaged in international library work, your personal life will be transformed every time you encounter and embrace a foreign culture; your personal boundaries will be expanded. International collaboration is needed if we want to make this world a more livable place.